

Multiple Sclerosis and Cognition: Patient Fact Sheet



Common myths about thinking skills in people with MS

■ **Myth:** *Thinking difficulties are rare in people with MS.*

Truth: People with MS commonly have problems with thinking skills, with >50% of people reporting cognitive difficulties.

■ **Myth:** *Thinking difficulties are only due to MS.*

Truth: MS affects brain function and can lead to difficulties with thinking. These problems may be worse in Veterans with other cognitive risk factors (e.g., depression, high blood pressure, alcohol/drug use, sleep problems).

■ **Myth:** *Thinking difficulties are always a sign of Alzheimer's dementia (AD).*

Truth: Most people with MS do not meet criteria for dementia and do not display the primary symptoms of AD.

What we know about cognition and MS

- **40-70%** of individuals with MS demonstrate deficits on formal tests of thinking skills. Difficulties may include:
 - learning/remembering information
 - processing information quickly
 - problem-solving/reasoning
- Most people exhibit mild, relatively stable symptoms. **Risk factors** for more severe symptoms and faster decline may include:
 - progressive forms of MS
 - increased age, male sex
 - medical and mental health conditions
- Cognitive symptoms often **emerge early, persist**, and **interfere** with daily function (e.g., occupation) and quality of life.

Examples of thinking difficulties



- Forgetting to take medications
- Trouble coming up with a word during conversation
- Difficulty paying attention or multitasking
- Becoming lost or having difficulty with directions
- Trouble thinking quickly

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What to do if you have concerns about thinking skills

- The first step is to discuss this with your medical or mental health care providers. They will assist you in addressing your concerns and may refer you to a specialist for further evaluation.
- Your health care provider may ask questions to better understand your symptoms. For example:
 - When did these symptoms start?
 - What are some examples?
 - How do they affect your daily life?
- You may be referred for a **neuropsychological evaluation**. This may include an interview and taking standardized paper-and-pencil tests designed to assess thinking skills.
- You may be referred for a treatment called **cognitive rehabilitation**. This is a treatment designed to help with thinking difficulties. Your health care provider can refer you to a clinical specialist (e.g., neuropsychologist, speech-language pathologist, occupational therapist) for this treatment.

Some ways to improve thinking skills

COGNITIVE STRATEGIES

- **Memory:** set alarms and reminders to prompt you to complete tasks, attend appointments, or take your medication
- **Attention/Concentration:** when you need to concentrate, reduce distractions (turn off the TV, go to a quiet room, wear ear plugs, etc.)

POSITIVE HEALTH BEHAVIORS

- **Planning and organization:** prioritize your to-do list to focus on the most important tasks first
- Practice good **sleep hygiene** (e.g., set sleep & wake times, avoid screen time in bed)
- Follow **medical and mental health** treatment recommendations
- Use **relaxation strategies** (e.g., deep breathing, meditation) to reduce stress
- **Exercise** may improve thinking skills, mood, and physical health

